DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 552 CS 509 582

AUTHOR du Pre, Athena
TITLE Diversity in the Classroom: A Case Study in Gender Awareness.
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern States Communication Association (Savannah, GA, April 2-6, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Class Activities; *Classroom Communication; Classroom Research; Communication Research; *Cultural Context; Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Diversity (Student); Higher Education; *Sex Differences; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS *Gender Issues

ABSTRACT

A college classroom in a southern U.S. university served as the location for a case study on the effects of gender on communication. Of 31 students in the class, only 8 were men. The majority of class time was devoted to discussion; a typical class consisted of a presentation of terms and theories in a text, and an effort to find "real life" evidence for or against the ideas in print. Students frequently reviewed elements of popular culture on television or in movies or magazines. Each student wrote three personal experience papers under detailed guidelines of "reflect and respond," and also wrote in journals. Students swapped written material (with anonymous title pages) and commented on it. The students' written responses to the reflect and respond exercise suggested that they were respectful of differences and noted some similarities. Student papers which described unconventional gender roles provided an interesting contrast to those of students with more traditional upbringing. The give and take of such an assignment presents unique opportunities for all involved. Although the exercise was directed toward gender issues, it could be adapted to a range of perspectives. Assuming that diversity appreciation is a goal to be pursued in education, it would be wise to develop exercises which affect classroom culture and expose students to new ways of thinking about themselves and others. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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ED 411 552

Running head: DIVERSITY

Diversity in the Classroom:
A Case Study on Gender Awareness

Athena du Pre', Ph.D.

Department of Communication and Theatre

Southeastern Louisiana University

SLU Box 451, Hammond LA 70402

(504) 549-2899 or 549-2105

adupre@selu.edu

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Diversity in the Classroom:

A Case Study on Gender Awareness

They were outnumbered. Something like 8 to 23. The men, I mean. Those curious, courageous, or careless enough to have enrolled in a senior level course called Gender Effects on Communication. If they hadn't foreseen the lopsided demographics, they might have been surprised the first day. But they didn't show it much. They just sort of gravitated to a far corner, an informal coalition with (literally) their backs to the wall.

Sometimes it was funny, discussing evidence that men tend to dominate conversations, for instance. The women in the class had plenty to say, and they did, often with humor and gusto. The men said very little much of the time. I wondered if they were purposefully silent, proving a point by submitting. I doubted it though. Probably they were just apprehensive. Who wouldn't be? For the moment at least, political correctness and sheer numbers were against them.

Interestingly enough, research suggests that diversity in the classroom is a challenge whether there is a little or a lot of diversity among the students involved. Recent studies (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) conclude that first-year college students who interact frequently and meaningfully with diverse peers become more tolerant of diversity

than their counterparts who keep company with others similar to themselves.

The mind-opening effects of a college education are by no means a given, however. Pascarella et al. (1996) found a slight decrease in tolerance for diversity among members of fraternities and sororities. The authors describe these groups as more "homogeneous and insulating" (p. 190) than most. Thus it seems that college experiences may either restrict or expand students' openness to diverse people and diverse ideas.

Curricula and educators unprepared for the challenges and benefits of diversity may be unable to make the most of it, and may even intensify intolerance. Pascarella et al. (1996) note positive correlations between students' perception that the educational institution is nondiscriminatory and students' own respect for diversity.

The sources of diversity are plentiful--from cultural differences associated with race, age, family structure, nationality, and gender, to diverse ideas, philosophies, and modes of expression. This paper describes the experiences of a senior-level university class who took part in a ongoing diversity awareness exercise over the course of a four-month semester. The exercise, which I call Reflect and Respond,

combines personal reflection with a nonthreatening (anonymous) sharing of ideas.

The class's experiences are described here, following an examination of diversity literature and practical tips for promoting diversity awareness in the classroom.

Literature Review

Rationale for Diversity Awareness

There are several impetuses for promoting diversity awareness in college. One is demographic. Callan (1996) forecasts the largest surge in higher education enrollment since the Baby Boomers (Tidal Wave I) went to college. In Callan's view, the upcoming tidal wave will be even larger and far more diverse than Tidal Wave I. As he puts it: "The most diverse students in our history are about to knock on the doors of colleges and universities" (p. 28). Population figures suggest that the ability to the live and work productively among diverse others is increasingly important in the United States.

Secondly, even where cultural diversity is not apparent, we may do well to foster and encourage diverse ways of thinking. Research suggests that the benefits are manifold. For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that college students challenged to take part in provocative discussions about values and differences were, by graduation, (a) more interested than others in the arts, (b) more

receptive to new information, (c) more concerned with civil rights, (d) and more apt to become actively involved in community efforts. Such students also perceived themselves to be less constrained by social stereotypes concerning family roles and career choices.

Of course, although diversity may not always be apparent, a true absence of it is hard to imagine. Even individuals who grow up in the same home have different life stories, perceptions, relationships, and expectations. Appropriately enough, many diversity awareness efforts begin with a personal inventory. Following is a brief discussion of some classroom diversity exercises suggested in the literature. Interested persons can find an abundant supply of practical tips for all aged students (see, for example, Angelo & Cross, 1993; Davidman & Davidman, 1994; DeVillar, Faltis, & Cummins, 1994; Kendall, 1983; Tiedt & Tiedt, 1979). This review narrows the list to those exercises of direct relevance to the case study to be presented here.

Educators' Suggestions on Diversity Programs

Many efforts to promote diversity appreciation include two phases, an introspective assessment of personal identity and influences, and an effort to share ideas with others. Exercises aimed at both objectives are described here.

In the interest of introspection, Frederick (1995) offers several suggestions. Among them is the use of provocative quotations,

cartoons, photographs, and videos to introduce new ideas and promote nonthreatening discussion of diverse viewpoints. He also encourages students to describe themselves "multi-hyphenetically;" that is, to acknowledge the combination of influences which affect them. For instance, one might be a Baptist-Irish-American-Southern-Female-City Woman. This exercise avoids oversimplified either/or categorizations such as black/white or male/female and recognizes the complexity of each individual. Frederick also has students create autobiographical stories, metaphors, and pictographs and share their creations with others.

In a similar exercise, Arvizu (1994) applies an anthropological technique to classroom learning. By asking students to chronicle and share their life histories (as research informants might), he encourages them to examine their own cultural influences and present themselves in a confident way to others. His use of life history exercises to increase awareness among educators has been used successfully in settings as diverse as Palau, Gaum, the Marshall Islands, and the United States. (For more on journaling and journal entry prompts see Angelo & Cross, 1993; Ludwig, 1995.)

Before these activities can be successful, however, it may be necessary to rethink classroom procedures overall. Several scholars call for an overhaul of classroom culture. Hodgkinson (1987) urges

educators to reconsider the competitive philosophy of mainstream education in the United States. He writes: "Many schools still believe that two students helping each other to solve a problem is a kind of plagiarism, even though collaborative problem solving is the major mode they will use throughout their lives" (p. 9). As Hodgkinson points out, a competitive, work-alone model is of limited utility in "real life." Additionally, it serves to insulate students from different peers and ideas, placing them in inherently adversarial, rather than cooperative, roles. (Recall Pascarella et al.'s 1996 conclusion that isolation among like others may actually escalate intolerance among college students.)

Sharing ideas can be frightening, particularly for those who have learned to associate diversity with discrimination. In his article Walking on Eggs: Mastering the Dreaded Diversity Discussion, Frederick (1995) suggests that educators begin with written guidelines and objectives which clarify for them and for students what the class is trying to achieve and what behavior will best serve their goals. He also advises educators to acknowledge tensions and viewpoints aloud. If tensions become too strained, he says, ask students to take time out to meta-analyze what is happening. Frederick reassures students that it is okay to take risks and be wrong sometimes. If someone issues a particularly offensive remark, he slowly repeats the remark to the

speaker and offers him/her another chance to speak. Frederick writes:

> Usually--in fact almost always--having heard his or her words repeated nonjudgmentally, the person who made the offensive remark will rephrase, changing not only language but meaning and intent. What a wonderful gift for a student, with others carefully watching, to have an opportunity to change and grow as a result of being gently invited to look in a mirror. (p. 91)

In summary, the literate suggests that colleges and universities may play an important role in promoting (or restricting) students' appreciation of diversity. Although the influx of culturally diverse students into higher education is one reason to consider diversity awareness, there may be other reasons and rewards as well. Among them are personal enrichment, continued learning, and a sense of civic responsibility.

About This Study

Following is a description of the participants in this study, as well as the rationale and directions for the Reflect and Respond exercise.

Context

Participants in the case study described here were members of a senior-level communication class on the effects of gender, taught at a

southern University. Of 31 students in the class, 8 were men, the others women.

The majority of class time was devoted to discussion. A typical class consisted of a brief presentation of terms and theories in the text, and an effort to find "real life" evidence for (or against) the ideas in print. I frequently brought in or assigned students to review elements of popular culture in television shows, movies, magazine articles, book chapters, advertisements, the funny papers, indeed almost anything they or I could imagine.

As part of the course requirements, each student wrote three Personal Experience Papers. In each case, anonymous copies of the papers were distributed among class members. Each student read the paper s/he received and wrote an anonymous reply to it, which was returned (by me) to the original author. Thus, students were able to dialogue in a nonthreatening way about issues of personal and theoretical interest.

Purpose

My sense that journaling can be a starting point for reflection and dialogue led me to consider its possibilities for the Gender Effects on Communication class. In advance of the class, I worried that some students would be inhibited speaking about gender issues. I was also wary that an examination of gender can easily become a study of

stereotypes. Although the generalizations are necessary to describe gender as a cultural phenomenon, I hoped students would recognize the presence of (and potential for) nonstereotypical ways of being. Finally, I was worried that class discussion would take on a "battle of the sexes" character, pitting women against men in nonproductive debates.

I got the idea for a journal entry swap while reading portions of journals that students submitted to me in a variety of classes. Reading them, I was both fascinated and overwhelmed. The complexity of students' ideas earned my respect. At the same time, I wondered if they realized the astounding similarities among them. I regretted that there wasn't time to respond to each student's ideas. The dialogue would have been rewarding--as much for me as for them.

An on-going exercise which would require personal reflection and a nonthreatening exchange of ideas appealed to me. My objectives were somewhat paradoxical. I wished students to practice both acceptance and skepticism. In other words, where there existed a plurality of ideas, I hoped they could respectfully examine them all, deciding for themselves which elements were most useful and applicable to situations which might concern them. If I had a motto of the class it would have been: "Neither accept nor reject any idea in entirety." All in all, I had three objectives for the Reflect and Respond

exercise:

1. To help students understand the cultural influences on their gender identity and ways of communicating.
2. To help students understand how personal choices affect gender their identity and ways of communicating.
3. To help students appreciate the diversity and similarities among them (particularly regarding gender).

The directions for the assignment are described below, followed by excerpts from journal entries which indicate the extent to which the assignment met stated objectives.

Directions for the Assignment

As part of the course requirements, each student was required to write three Personal Reflection Papers and three Response Papers. (I initially assigned four of each paper, but shortened it to three midsemester. As the class discovered, six papers is a lot of sharing!) Directions for the Personal Reflection Papers are as follows:

> **Personal Reflection Papers**
>
> [Three] times during the semester, you will be asked to apply the terms of the course to your own experiences and philosophy. You will do this in the form of 1- to 2-page typed papers. This assignment is meant to stimulate interest and awareness in class members' diversity as well as their similarities. Consequently,

there is no "correct" response to the writing topics posed. You may feel free to write honestly and candidly without fear of reprisal. (You will be graded on the effort you put into the assignment.)

How Personal Reflection Papers work:

1. You write a 1- to 2-page paper and turn in two copies of it.
2. Top one copy with an anonymous title page which includes:
   - the title of your paper (make it interesting and descriptive),
   - a code number (to be randomly assigned by the instructor),
   - a few words or phrases describing yourself.

   If you wish to keep your identity secret, be selective about the way you describe yourself on the title page and in the paper. However, do give some information about yourself so the reader can understand your perspective.
3. Top the other copy with a title page which includes the same information, but gives your name rather than your code. (Only the instructor will read this copy.)
4. When the papers are submitted, I will give each class member a chance to select an anonymous paper, which s/he will read and react to in the form of a Response Paper.

I assigned a topic for each paper (see Table 1), in the form of

Table One

Personal Reflection Papers

Topic For Paper 1

Think about your relationship with your parents. How were your connections to your father and mother different? How were they similar? How did sex and gender influence each relationship? If you have siblings of the other sex, were their relationships with your parents different from yours?

Topic for Paper 2

What do you think of the concept of androgyny? Do you think it is desirable for women, for men, for both? Why or why not? With which aspects of your gender identity are you satisfied and dissatisfied? What are you doing to alter aspects of your gender identity that you find confining or inappropriate for you personally?

Topic for Paper 3

The author discussed different perspectives on how men express and experience closeness. Do you think men really are less able to engage in closeness than women, as the male deficit model claims, or that men and women simply have different ways of experiencing and communicating closeness? How does the theory you accept affect your behaviors and interpretations of others?

Note. I assigned these topics to reflect the course's emphasis on gender, although the assignment may be adapted to suit a range of interests.

questions. I adapted these questions largely from discussion items suggested in the text (Julia Wood's Gendered Lives [1994]).

On the days Personal Reflection Papers were due, each student handed me the copy with his/her name on it and placed the second, (anonymous) copy on a table. When all papers were submitted, students were invited to approach the table and select a paper to read and react to over the next week. (Brief, biographical sketches on the title pages allowed them some information to guide their choice of papers.)

Following are the directions for completing Response Papers.

Response Papers

On the day you turn in a Personal Response paper, you will choose another student's paper. (Throughout the semester, try to select a range of different perspectives, some similar to yours and some different.) Read the paper you choose and compare/contrast the author's experiences with your own. Type a 1- to 2-page response to what you have read. Your reaction should be based on your experiences and feelings. In the spirit of sharing and comparing, you may express a different point of view but do not criticize or belittle the author.

Again, turn in two copies, one with your name on the title page and another with "To: (Original Author's Code)" and "From: (Your Code)". Include a brief description of yourself on each title page. Each student will receive an anonymous response paper in response to his/her Personal Reflection paper.

Following is an analysis of the exercise relative to the goals set for it.

Results

Overall, I was pleased with the Reflect and Respond exercise. Students frequently mentioned items read or written. Moreover, their written responses to each other suggested that they were respectful of differences and surprised to note as many similarities as they did. Reaction papers were dotted with such terms as "I agree!" and "I feel the same way!" One male student responded to a female classmate's paper: "I can relate to your situation. I too am from a divorced family, and also considered myself a daddy's boy. . ." Another response commiserated, "My paper . . . mirrored yours almost point by point." On the other hand, some responded to classmates' papers saying, "My experiences have been much different than yours," and, "Reading your paper opened my eyes."

Relative to the objectives of the exercise, I was interested to see if (and how) students regarded such issues as: (a) cultural mores, (b) individual differences, and (c) perceptions of similarity and diversity.

Cultural Mores

Many students reflected on the effects of gender stereotyping on their own upbringing. Often mentioned was the cultural expectation that females should nurture and males should protect and provide. For instance, a 21-year-old woman in the class recalled the traditional expectations communicated by her parents:

> I can remember that on Saturdays was clean up day and my brothers and my dad would have to stay outside and do all of the yardwork, while mom and I would clean the house and make lunch. . . These values were instilled because my father came from a traditional Spanish family where he was brought up that males were the breadwinners and the females were the housekeepers and childbearers.

They also identified with the cultural taboo which says males are not to associate with anything "feminine." A woman who grew up with three brothers wrote:

> I can remember one instance where I tried dressing my brother up like a girl with make-up and everything and my dad got so angry he yelled at us and said, "Don't you dress him up like a girl! You'll make him into a sissy," and ever since then I never tried to play dress up with any of them.

Some of the male class members described severe cultural restrictions on masculine behavior. One lamented: "I did not have much of a relationship with my father. He was usually demanding and unsympathetic towards me. This was his way of trying to mold me into a man." Another declared: "Start with a heaping pile of overbearing masculinity, add a blob of homophobia, and season with a plethora of expectations and stereotypes and you've cooked up a dish called the modern man." Another cautioned: "There are certain guidelines while communicating with other males. Never show a weakness unless you want it exploited." In a similar way, one male described the way he and a friend joke around about his friend's dire financial situation:

> He tends to take money off his charge cards, furthering his debt, just to pay the rent. . . . I know this problem is extremely depressing to him. When we talk about the situation we tend to laugh about it. Like it's a joke! Every time I start to laugh, I think about how insane I am for laughing . . . We shouldn't making lite of the situation but it seems to be the only recourse. He will never break down and cry with me or anybody else.

In the midst of such reflections, students expressed mixed feelings about the desirability of sexual typecasting. One woman wrote:

> [I'm] old fashioned. I don't want to be the power house

> executive, I want to be a wife and mother who happens to have a career. I am a care taker . . . I am completely satisfied with my own gender identity. It's other people that tend to have a problem with it.

One student's response summed up the ambivalence present in many papers:

> Our books says that androgynous women have been shown in studies to be more "health, adjusted, satisfied, and competent." On the other hand, I think that physical androgyny for women is a very unattractive and undesirable quality. . . As a heterosexual male, I am awe struck sometimes by traditional feminine beauty. . . In fact, sometimes I'm amazed that women find men attractive at all. I surely don't see anything appealing in my own sex.

All in all, students' reflections often support research evidence regarding gender socialization in the United States--for better or worse. This "real life" evidence provides an interesting illustration of research and theory, and draws attention to the common experiences of class members. However, stereotypical socialization does not tell the whole story, as the following section demonstrates.

Individual Differences

Some students emphasized culturally atypical aspects of their

personal histories. For instance, a woman in the class wrote of her father's nonstereotypical role in the family:

> My father worked nights. So [he] was present when we left for school and when we returned. My father was the roomfather for my kindergarten class. He would bring his guitar and his puppets on show and tell day and entertain the class. He loved being involved in both mine and my sister's school work. Because he was there for both of us, I developed a very special bond with my father. I saw the nurturing side of him as well as the side that could be stern.

Mothers, too, can break gender stereotypes. As one man in the class wrote: "My mother was always the one who came home after work and played with me, teaching me how to play football and baseball . . . In contrast, my father was not a big sports fan." Similarly, a women who grew up in the company of four sisters and a single mother reflected:

> Since there was no man around the house to do the chores that would often be referred to as masculine, such as mowing the grass, or fixing things around the house, mom had to do it herself, and usually with our unwilling help. Seeing her doing all this herself, rather than just hiring a man to do it, taught us that these tasks were not masculine per say, but rather things

that had to be done, regardless of who did them.

As for their own gender identities, several students reflected on the benefits of unconventional behavior. One male class member reflected:

> I spent most of my early childhood with my sister and her friends, which in retrospect, didn't turn out to be a problem. In fact, I believe it is the sole reason that I have certain qualities which few men have. I tend to have more friends that are girls than guys, and my romantic relationships with women have been extremely close and very emotionally based with plenty of communication between us . . . I'll take that over a good jump shot any day.

In summary, student papers which describe unconventional gender roles provide an interesting contrast to those of students with more traditional upbringing. In reflecting on their own backgrounds and reading other students' reflection papers, class members were presumably exposed (as I was) to the the diversity of their life experiences.

As might be expected, there were similarities and differences in students perceptions of men's and women's communication in current relationships as well.

Similarity and Diversity Between the Sexes

Class members of both sexes seemed eager to point out the differences between men's and women's communication, particularly in romantic relationships. Wrote one woman:

> I sometimes feel that me and my boyfriend (of 2 years) are on completely different planets when we are communicating. For example, one day we spent an entire afternoon fishing with two of his buddies. He was thrilled because he had his friends with him and I was there also. By the end of the day, after his friends had gone home, I wanted to spend some time together, just talking. He, on the other hand, was tired after all of that fishing and wanted to go to sleep. He said that we spent all day together and could not understand why I was getting upset. . . . This was one of those instances when I wanted to "talk" and he was pleased with "doing."

Another woman wondered at her boyfriend's idea of romance:

> On Saturdays, he washes my car. He thinks he is being romantic. I do not see how, unless we are going to a Drive-Inn that night. I guess I am ungrateful, but I just do not see how this is a display of affection.

Women frequently pronounced themselves exasperated by what they perceived as men's reluctance to talk. A mother of two remarked of

communication with her husband: "I'm often wondering when the day will come that we will sit together on that swing on the porch and converse." Another took partial credit for the difference between she and her boyfriend:

> I am just as guilty as he is. I like to talk. I mean, tallllk. I want to know things like, "What if I get a job in Delaware and I make a lot more money than you, what are you going to do?" He usually asks, "Did you get a job in Delaware? . . . No, well, maybe you should wait until get a job in Delaware and then we will discuss it." He does not understand that I want his reply to be, "I could live anywhere as long as it is with you." . . . If I ask him to tell me how he feels, he thinks something is wrong, so I have advanced to trickery.

Simultaneously, a man in the class submitted his perspective on the same dynamic:

> Men want to know everything is okay in the relationship today, that's enough. A guy can rest easy at night knowing that on that particular day, his girlfriend didn't sleep with any of his friends and she still thinks he's great. That's all we need to know. Women want to know what color socks the crossing guard was wearing down on 13th and Main. They'll even make up hypothetical situations when real life runs out of topic material.

> "If I were hit by a bus tomorrow, would you bring a date to the funeral?"

Although most papers emphasized the differences between men's and women's communication, they did not always portray the disparity as insurmountable or wholly undesirable. One student attested: "Different does not always mean wrong. Men are socialized differently than women." They also ventured means to a truce. Suggested one student:

> It wouldn't kill us guys to open up a little from time to time (that shows more strength than weakness, in my opinion). And women could summarize a bit more; the Cliff's Notes guide to gender communication.

In summary, students' reflections and responses suggest that gender differences do exist, although the desirability, influences, and manifestations of these differences is the subject of diverse opinion.

Conclusions

The Reflect and Respond exercise yielded some interesting results. In one respect it allowed students to reveal ideas they might not have shared openly with the class, particularly when they felt outnumbered by others unlike themselves. The give and take of such an assignment presents unique opportunities for all involved. Although the exercise was in this case directed toward gender issues, it

could be easily adapted to a range of perspectives by simply changing paper topics. I was pleased that people who seemed visibly similar were often shown to be quite diverse in some aspects, and those who seemed oppositional formed unexpected alliances.

Assuming that diversity appreciation is a goal to be pursued in education, we do well to develop exercises which affect classroom culture and expose students to new ways of thinking about themselves and others. This is as important (perhaps more important) in cases where diversity is not apparent as where it is.

Even when diversity is not obvious, it can almost always be found within course content and students. Courses which directly address socialization factors such as gender provide an especially germane arena. However, the danger with such courses is that they will teach only stereotypes. Although stereotypes are informative to a point, it seems to me they must be tempered with reminders that humans are more diverse and complex than research can usually show.

Of course, there are limits to what the Reflect and Respond exercise can accomplish, and limits to our assessment of it. Truthfully, I probably benefited more from the exercise than did any one in the class. I am not sure how effective a three-time paper swap is at depicting the breadth of diversity and similarity among class members. I tried to

share the gist of papers in class discussions, without jeopardizing the anonymity of their authors. Still, I had a unique vantage point in reading all the papers.

Furthermore, beyond the content of the papers themselves, it is difficult to gauge their effect on the class. For instance, I cannot say with confidence whether the assignment affected class participation. Papers were sometimes the topic of discussion, and men in the class did become more forthcoming as the semester proceeded, whether from journaling or other reasons, I can't say precisely.

In conclusion, in the class described, the Reflect and Respond exercise produced interesting evidence of the real life relevance of cultural expectations, the uniqueness of personal experience, and the perceived nature of men's and women's communication. As such, the exercise represents a nonthreatening way to identify and appreciate diversity in the classroom.

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